DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 504 IR 021 425

AUTHOR	Van Patten, James J.; Chen, Ge
TITLE	The Internet Culture, Student Learning and Student Retention.
PUB DATE	2002-04-01
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 1-5, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Education; Computer Mediated Communication; *Computer Uses in Education; Distance Education; *Dropout Prevention; Enrollment; Higher Education; *Internet; Online Systems
IDENTIFIERS	Technology Role

ABSTRACT

Regardless of all its shortcomings, the Internet is essential in student retention and learning for at-risk students, homebound students, placebound employees, and for assisting workers on and off the job to maintain and upgrade their skills. The search for integrating the Internet to provide ease of accessing information with strategies that enhance student retention and learning continues. This paper briefly describes the role of the Internet in higher education. Discussion includes email communications and Web sites dealing with student retention; online initiatives at the University of Texas at Austin, which has been working to become a paperless school; the issue of plagiarism; opportunities offered by distance education; filtering Internet information; offensive material and first amendment speech rights; spamming; and initiatives undertaken to deal with quality of Internet information. (Contains 10 references.) (AEF)

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The Internet Culture, Student Learning and Student Retention

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The Internet has changed the structure of learning and teaching. Curriculum designs include web sites. Public school and university faculty include these sites in their syllabus. In many cases faculty members have their own web sites for instructional purposes. The number of web sites is expanding exponentially, but for individual searches depending on the degree of complexity of the search, the sites are limited for specific information. Snider (2000) noted that the web is growing by 7.3 million pages a day with 84% of the pages based in the United States. He also reported that the percentage of specific information useful to individuals is approximately 0.01%. The challenge of technocrats is to keep the web relevant.

Student Retention: Institutions of higher education are engaged in a variety of initiatives to retain freshman students. Student personnel retention offices concentrate on providing counseling and support for undergraduates. In some instances phone banks and computer response teams are available on a twenty four hour basis to provide support services to students who have problems coping with university environments.

Use of the Internet web site and e-mail is nearly universal in education. It is particularly helpful to be able to reach at-risk students quickly through e mail contacts. Undergraduates often face financial, domestic, health, transportation, violence and abuse challenges making it impossible for them to attend class for varying periods of time. Maintaining constant contact through e mail gives instructors an opportunity to encourage them to fulfill course requirements if at all possible. There are a number of web sites dealing with student retention. One that is particularly helpful was developed by University of Oklahoma Patsy Broadway and Ruth Kerce. The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange has developed a national retention data base as well as a forum for discussing retention issues (CSRDE, 2001).

The University of Texas at Austin has been working to become a paperless school. Two of the most recent initiatives are UT Direct and Advisor's Tool Kit. With a UT EID and password, any currently enrolled student, or faculty, and staff can go to this website for information on academic services, financial services, campus services and other links. Students can check course schedules on line, register and pay tuition and fees through the site, as well as check out all the services and programs available on campus.

The Advisor Tool Kit was created in the fall of 2001 mainly for academic advisors and staff working closely with UT students. With a student's ID, the authorized advisor or staff member can access student information instantly. The student information includes high school performance, test scores, college and degree audit, courses completed or current enrollment, academic status, scholarship, financial aid, payment information etc. Advisors can write their notes on line about the nature of a student appointment. The notes are available for quick reference when the student comes back or is seen by another advisor or counselor from a different department. The advisor's notes are helpful in keeping track of a student's needs, progress, and performance at the school.

Some schools have established on-line advising for the benefit of students. Students don't have to make an appointment with an advisor if the questions and answers can be exchanged on line. It saves advisors a lot of time so they can focus on more in-depth issues. It is embraced by students for its flexibility of time and non-intimidating nature.

The Retention Services in the Office of the Dean of Students at the University of Texas at Austin is one of the components that relies on emails and websites to recruit students, advertise activities and events, and communicate with students on a variety of issues. The Retention Services also work in collaboration with the University of Texas Learning Center through the internet to keep track of the students' use of tutoring services. Students' needs are accessed at the Retention Services before the students are sent to the UTLC for tutoring. The UTLC then sends the Retention Service for further follow up a list of students who have been there. Due consideration is given to privacy concerns.

Internet Culture: There are some caveats in using the Internet. Instructors who require students to write papers need to inform them of the importance of attribution for any material used. Web sites advertise research papers at low cost. Students who use these services denigrate the learning process. Instructors need to monitor student work to assure there is not plagiarism. Fee based Plagiarism Detection Sites are available for instructors. However most instructors are so inundated with grading papers, examinations, class preparation there is little time to deal with the issue. Instructors as part of the final examination could ask students to summarize main points of their

research papers (Student Retention, 1998). Student personnel offices maintain a variety of services to assist students in person or through the Internet.

Distance Education provides an opportunity to retain students who are placebound (have family or job responsibilities that make it difficult to attend scheduled classes) and have to drop out of attending on campus classes. Carr (2000) noted that student retention in distance education is also a challenge depending on instructor's competency and ability to function in a different teaching environment. During a distance learning semester that I taught, there were continuing phone connection disruptions often making it difficult to communicate effectively with students at five sites throughout the state. It was helpful to announce at the beginning of each class period that technical difficulties may make it difficult to have two way video and contact would be made individual by e mail. There has been much progress in making distance learning effective through better phone connections, more effective use of a variety of strategies including VCR tapes, and up to date instructor web sites (Carr, 2001).

The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the *Neighborhood Internet Protection Act*, 2001 was designed to restrict information detrimental to students through blocks or filters. The well intentioned effort has often led to worthwhile information being blocked. Educational administrators have overriding authority to deal with filter issues, but often don't have the time or knowledge to get involved leaving the issue to software company employees, often entry level workers, who follow the philosophy "if in doubt block". Software companies engaged in filtering, identify a set of categories for materials they want to block, the key words are used to identify items within the categories. Often it is difficult to determine worthwhile and detrimental sites, so everything is blocked. Since it is difficult for teachers to unblock materials that are essential in learning, software filtering decisions are accepted. The issue of academic freedom, inadequate training for use of filtering information often by minimum wage earners, and blocking the use of phrases and words that seem detrimental but in reality are essential in expanding worthwhile information access are involved in the concept of filtering. There is the challenge of balanced presentation of information with the possibility single special interest groups will influence filtering processes. Elementary school parents are on the whole supportive of filtering information such as pornography.

Some parents feel all Internet sexual material should be blocked until children reach high school age.

Willard (2002) wrote about possible student suspensions for threats and speech that could disrupt the school. Willard noted that a Montana high school student who was suspended and transferred for taking pictures of the "10 hottest freshmen girls" and putting them on his personal web site is fighting the suspension. As long as major school disruption does not occur, students have first amendment speech rights regardless of how offensive the material might be. Courts generally uphold free student free speech rights. Beussink v. Woodland R-IV School District (1998) overturned suspension for a student who use vulgar language in criticizing teachers and his principal. The Federal Court ruling found that disliking or being upset by the content of a student's speech is not justification for suspension to limit such speech (Your School and the Law, 2002.)

Another issue in the Internet culture is spam. Spamming has infiltrated all aspects of the Internet, leaving students exposed to relentless advertising of the corporate culture. Software companies need the funds that advertising brings to meet the cost of their services, but excessive, persistent selling may disrupt student learning.

Quality of Internet Information:

A number of initiatives have been undertaken to deal with the quality of Internet information. Carnvelae (2000) reported on Senator Bob Kerry chairing a commission on high standards for World Wide Web courses. The commission called on individual institutions to monitor their programs, and Alan Arkatov, a member of the commission called on an entrepreneurial spirit for-profit on-line schools. Alan warned against excessive regulatory zeal. Students using the Internet need to be taught effective methods to cut down time spent in useless searches yielding worthless information. Hackers often infiltrate the Internet ruining hard drives and spreading viruses.

Carnevale (2002) notes accrediting agencies are working to evaluate engineering programs that let students complete laboratory work over the Internet. Some engineering faculty are involved in developing virtual labs for Internet work,

Perhaps the most insidious challenge is the use of the Internet to spread misinformation, hate language, pornography, viruses and messages from single special interest groups.

Conclusion: The Internet culture remains a work in progress. It is necessary to use in our 21st century. Regardless of all its shortcomings it is essential in student retention and learning for students-at-risk, for home bound students, for placebound employees, and assisting workers on and off the job to maintain and upgrade their skills. Young (2002) reports on a trend toward hybrid teaching combining traditional and online instruction. With a changing undergraduate culture, many students find it hard to attend class on a regular basis due to job requirements, a variety of on and off campus activities, and in some instances major travel and parking problems. Fairleigh Dickinson University requires all its students to take at least one online course. Students find such courses beneficial even if they live on campus. Hybrid courses are helpful to provide a variety of support services to students. Young continued by noting that some universities report high drop-out rates with online courses. The search for intertwining the Internet to provide ease of accessing information with strategies that enhance student retention and learning, continues as higher education institutions address the factors the result in large undergraduate drop out rates. This is particularly important since undergraduates provide large classes with commensurate tuition that helps support the more expensive graduate labs and courses.

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